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THE CAHIERS OF 1789 AS AN EVIDENCE OF A COMPROMISE SPIRIT

IN the many works which have been written on the French Revolution, one of the conceptions which the historical student most frequently meets is that the whole movement was the result of an intense feeling of bitterness existing between the noble and peasant classes, due to the exemptions and privileges which the former enjoyed. It has been asserted that it was this hatred of the nobility which made the whole Third Estate stand as a unit for the meeting of the States-General in a single assembly, while the privileged orders were as strenuous in their insistence upon the preservation of the old forms, and that it was not until one of these sentiments obtained a distinct victory that there was any opportunity for settling parliamentary institutions. I shall endeavor to show by a somewhat careful analysis of the cahiers of the periods that the assumed unity of the several orders was by no means a fact, that from the beginning there was a strong feeling among the clergy and nobility favorable to compromise forms and that the peasantry were not unanimously against such a solution.¹

Disregarding for the moment the customary grouping into nobility, clergy and Third Estate, the cahiers seem to justify a division of their authors into four classes: the reactionists, for whom the old methods of absolutism were sufficiently profitable; the mere complainants against the results of that system, who had nothing to offer as a substitute; the advocates of the radical school of democracy; and finally a section who wished reform in administration and were willing to attain it either by grafting new features upon the old régime or by abolishing it in its entirety, if only they could be persuaded that the proposed substitute would be both practical and permanent. It must also be remembered that the cahiers were not primarily voicings of the ideas on government prevalent in France at the time, but rather expressions of discontent with existing conditions. Thus the presence of a willingness to compromise is shown not so much by the proposals for new forms of government as by concessions to existing forms. Those cahiers which distinctly advocate views presumably opposed to the interests of

¹ It is by no means the purpose of this paper to present an exhaustive analysis of the cahiers on social and economic matters, but merely to consider them in so far as they relate to questions of the organization of the Assembly.

their class must be increased in number to get a true representation of the desire for harmony of which they are an evidence.

By the summoning of the States-General the government declared itself incapable of remedying existing conditions, calling upon the people for aid, and it was not until this declaration that plans for constructive legislation began to be hesitatingly advanced. Some of the petitions ask the king of his own good power to correct existing evils, while others turn to the Assembly for guidance. On one point alone are the people nearly unanimous; in the future financial affairs must be more ably conducted and the people consulted regarding taxation. Yet it is easy to infer too much from this. It was rather to cure the partiality with which the taxes had been assessed than to exercise any intrinsic right of saying how much should be levied that the States-General meant to assume control of taxation. Fully as much stress is laid on the provincial estates, whose duty this was, as upon the States-General. The fear of each order was that it would not be treated justly in the re-assessment.

It is for this reason that the cahiers divide on the question of vote by order or by head. Compromise methods of organization are suggested, and although but little attention is paid to these schemes, yet the mere fact that such suggestions are advanced and that the division on the question of voting does not correspond with the division into nobles and commoners so often made is surely of great importance in ascertaining whether or not there existed that radical feeling of hostility between the orders which would have prevented the acceptance of compromise measures had they been suggested by the king or some other recognized leader.

The cahiers of the Third Estate are more nearly unanimous than are those of the upper orders, especially insisting on vote by head until the questions of taxation are disposed of. There is, however, a noteworthy lack of expressions which would seem to imply any intention of doing away with the social privileges enjoyed by the nobility or of bringing either of the upper classes into a position of equality with the Third Estate. More frequently the king and the upper orders are assumed to be ignorant of the evils of the time and faith is expressed that, were they aware of the conditions, remedies would be effected. On the other hand, the majority of the cahiers of the nobility favor vote by order and the clergy incline in the same direction.¹

¹ Typical demands may be found in the cahiers of the Third Estate of Poitou, the nobility of Bourgogne and the clergy of Blois. See also a pamphlet entitled, "*L'Aristocratie enchaînée par le Peuple et par le Roi*," where a single chamber is considered as working for the interests of the king against the nobles.

This statement of the general trend of the three orders must not be taken as the unanimous voice of each. In every case there were exceptions, and the character of the men elected as delegates often shows that there was not that feeling of unity in each order which we are led to expect. Thus the Third Estates of Mantes et Meulan and Villers-Cotterets ask for the old division into orders, and in many other cases vote by head, while considered desirable, is not insisted on.¹

Among the upper estates exceptions are yet more common, as is but natural. The nobility was divided into two distinct classes, that of the sword and that of the robe. Among the former we find many liberal men who saw that the existing government in France was not a success and who earnestly desired something better, above all, men who had travelled,² and seen the workings of other constitutions. Moreover, the differences in wealth and conditions between the nobility and the Third Estate have often been exaggerated. The noblesse was not wealthy at the time of the Revolution. It "is being ruined and is wasting away day by day, while the middle classes are getting the large fortunes," wrote a noble as far back as 1755. They had sold their lands bit by bit to the peasants, retaining only the seignorial rights which often gave them the appearance rather than the reality of wealth. "A short period of abolition of technical rights and we shall have a new Society." An examination of their cahiers shows many of them controlled by the liberal wing, and we must assume that there were other assemblies in which the minority was large. One of the cahiers read as follows: "The votes should be by head and not by order, such a manner of proceeding being the only sensible one, and the only one tending to remove and destroy that egotism of caste which is the source of all our evils." Others would have this method of voting in regard to taxation alone, while others would postpone its operation to the next Assembly.³ Of the dele-

¹Le Tiers de Paris extra Muros, Bozas, Castelnaudary, Le Ponthieu and fifteen others distinctly provide for a change of view if it is considered advantageous. Le Maine asks for vote by order with the upper orders united. Of the total of delegates chosen there were: 15 nobles and high military officials, *i. e.*, nobility of the sword; 2 members of the parliaments; 150 minor officials, servants of the upper orders or of official establishments; 25-30 city and commune officials, maires, échevins, etc.; 210 lawyers, notaries, etc.; 75-80 shopkeepers, traders, etc.; 50 landowners; 40 ordinary laborers; 6-7 solely literary men. See *Liste par ordre alphabétique de Bailliages et Sénéchaussées de MM. les Députés aux États-Généraux*, Paris, 1789.

²See the list in Buckle, *History of Civilization*, I. 653-4; also the *Annual Register*, 1787, p. 4; Walpole, *Memoirs of George III.*, III. 107.

³There are about 150 cahiers of the nobles found in the *Archives Parlementaires*; of these 38 are absolutely opposed to vote by head; 20 seem opposed but do not forbid their representatives joining if this plan be adopted; 24 demand vote by head; 20 authorize it without restrictions; 37 are willing to resign themselves to it under various restrictions; 12 say nothing about the matter.

gates elected, the vast majority seem to have been noblemen of the sword as distinct from that of the robe, and nearly half to have been from the country.

Fully as noteworthy is the division among the clergy. As regards social questions, this order formed a miniature picture of all France. They are divided into two classes, the archbishops, bishops and higher ecclesiastics generally, drawn from the nobility and naturally sympathizing with them and the curés, who as logically sided with the commoners. This distinction is recognized in several of the cahiers, where two chambers are suggested, the clergy being divided. Among their petitions, then, we find less unanimity than in the case of either of the other orders,¹ while, owing to the large percentage of curés, it is probable that many of the doubtful cahiers may be taken as expressing a willingness to assent to compromise measures.

Thus among clergy and nobility there are many who distinctly sympathize with the peasantry, while among the latter there are many who wish a peaceful solution of the vexed question of organization, caring little for forms of government if only financial burdens may be equalized. The more we examine these lines of division the more evident it becomes that the terrible character of the French Revolution was not caused by the gradual accumulation of burdens upon the shoulders of the peasants, causing the gradual growth of a spirit of hostility between the several orders, but that there must have been somewhere a great lack of organizing ability, a dearth of the spirit of what we term practical politics, to allow such forces of moderation to have been wasted and a small minority of the dissatisfied sections to carry with them an Assembly the majority of which was composed of well-meaning delegates anxious to avail themselves of some practical way out of the difficulties which surrounded them.

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Professor Stephens in his *History of the French Revolution* gives an incorrect idea of the position of the nobility on this question (I. 55), possibly taken from the *Histoire Parlementaire* or Loménie's *Les Mirabeau*, where a statement corresponding to this may be found.

¹Of the 145 cahiers of the clergy, 9 seem to favor vote by head; 22 declare absolutely for vote by head; 33 declare absolutely for vote by order; 22 declare for vote by order with certain restrictions; 7 say they have a right to claim vote by order; 12 leave the matter to their own delegates; 40 make no mention of the method of voting. Of the persons elected, 205 seem to have been curés, 52 abbés or canons, 42 prelates, 7 monks, not including those clergy elected to represent other orders.